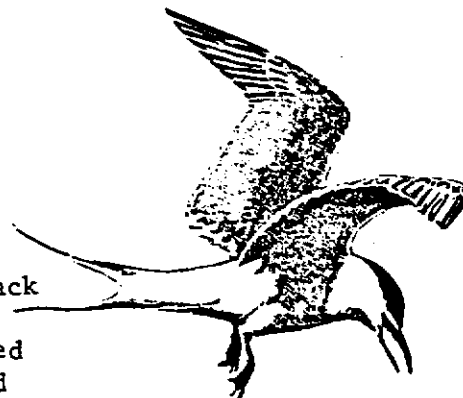


MASSACHUSETTS RARE AND ENDANGERED WILDLIFE

Common Tern (*Sterna hirundo*)

DESCRIPTION

Terns resemble small gulls, but are more graceful and have long forked tails, black caps and pointed bills. The Common Tern is 13 to 16 in (33-40 cm) long and has an orange-red bill with a black tip. The amount of black on the bill changes from 1/3 of the bill in May to almost absent in July. The males and females are marked the same. They are white below with pale gray back and wings. The white tail is edged with dark gray. The call is a harsh 'kee-urr'.



Forbush, E.W. Birds of Massachusetts.
Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 1929.

SIMILAR SPECIES IN MASSACHUSETTS

The Roseate Tern usually has a solid black bill. The bill may have red at the base during May through July when the birds are incubating eggs. Unlike other terns in Massachusetts, the Roseate Tern's tail extends beyond the wing tips when at rest.

The Arctic Tern has a bill that is blood red to the tip and has short legs that give the bird the appearance of crouching. The Arctic Tern is grayer than the Common Tern and has white cheeks that contrast with the throat and breast.

HABITAT IN MASSACHUSETTS

The Common Tern nests in colonies on sandy or rocky islands, sand dunes on barrier beaches and, less frequently, in salt marshes on sand spits and shingle beaches. This tern prefers areas that have open ground for the nest and patches of vegetation as cover for the chicks.

RANGE

The Common Tern breeds along the Atlantic Coast from New England to North Carolina. It has scattered breeding locations in inland North America



■ Summer range
■ Winter range

(continued overleaf)



● Verified since 1978
○ Reported prior to 1978

Breeding Distribution in Massachusetts
by Town

Distribution of *Sterna hirundo*

from northern New York, west through the Great Lakes to Montana and Alberta. The winter range of this species is from South Carolina and Baja, California, south to the Straits of Magellan.

In Massachusetts the Common Tern is restricted to the islands and barrier beaches along the coast. The Common Terns that nest in Massachusetts leave in September and October to wintering grounds on the coast of South America, from Colombia to southern Brazil. They return in late April or early May.

NESTING

The nests are depressions in the sand or a shallow cup of dead grass. Two or three mottled eggs are laid between mid-May and mid-June. Younger adults and birds that re-nest may continue to lay until mid-July. Both parents incubate the eggs which take about 22 days to hatch. The eggs usually hatch a day or two apart. Both adults also care for the chicks, bringing them fish to eat. The young are vulnerable to predation until they fledge about 23 days after hatching. The young birds depend on their parents for food for at least 8 weeks after fledging. In the late summer most of the birds move to the outer beaches of Cape Cod or the Islands. The families remain together at least until they migrate.

FEEDING

Common Terns feed within 5 miles (8 km) of the nesting area in shallow bays, inlets, tide-rips or along sheltered shorelines. They feed primarily on the sand lance (a slender fish up to 8.5 in) but also eat a variety of other small fish, crustaceans and invertebrates. They usually feed close to shore in water less than 15 in (40 cm) deep, but sometimes feed in deeper water over schools of predatory fish. Common Terns are generalist feeders taking a wide variety of prey by diving and dipping.

PREDATION AND DEFENSE

An important limit to breeding success is predation. Among the predators are the Great Horned Owl, Black-crowned Night Heron, Short-eared Owl, Common Crow, Red Fox, Norway Rat, Striped Skunk, Raccoon, Herring Gull and ants. The nocturnal Great Horned Owl will prey on adult terns as well as on the eggs and young birds. When the terns flee from the owl, other nocturnal predators are able to raid the nests unmolested. The terns do have a defense against diurnal predators such as humans, crows and gulls. A daytime intruder will be mobbed by the adult terns flying overhead, calling loudly, defecating, diving and even striking. Terns have suffered from displacement by the increasing numbers of gulls. If a pair of terns are unsuccessful at raising young several successive years they will relocate to another colony.

POPULATION STATUS

The Common Tern is classified as a Species of Special Concern in Massachusetts. In 1985 7,548 pairs nested in Massachusetts at 24 sites. The population is highly concentrated with 76% of the pairs nesting at only 4 sites. Massachusetts' population of Common Terns was greatly reduced by plume hunters in the late 1800's and recovered under protection to a peak of 40,000 pairs in the 1920's. Since the 1920's the tern population has declined overall with some years of increase. Though the 4 major colonies in Massachusetts are now protected from direct human disturbance through an intensive tern conservation program, large numbers of wintering terns are killed for food in South America.